

NBC SATURDAY NIGHT NEWS
NBC TV 6:30 PM AUGUST 10

Cuban Role in Nicaragua

CONNIE CHUNG: NBC News has learned that Cuban helicopter pilots, part of a 3,000 man Cuban contingent in Nicaragua, are getting more directly involved in the Nicaraguan civil war.

Robin Lloyd reports.

ROBIN LLOYD: Nine days ago when the U. S.-backed Nicaraguan rebels, the so-called contras, struck deep inside Nicaragua, they were attacked from the air, a rare glimpse of a Soviet combat helicopter in action. The pilot, according to U. S. intelligence sources, was not Nicaraguan, but Cuban. These sources have told NBC News that Cuban pilots are now flying most of the Soviet supplied combat helicopters for the Nicaraguan government, an indication, they say, of a more direct Cuban role in the conflict.

This new information surfaces at a time when the Nicaraguan rebels have opened up a military campaign deep inside Nicaragua. Administration officials say that these new Soviet helicopter gunships may give the Sandinista Army a decisive advantage. But rebel leaders claim they're now prepared to retaliate with newly purchased ground-to-air missiles.

BOSCO MATORES: We have acquired the capacity to defend ourselves and the civilian population in Nicaragua.

LLOYD: What has given the rebels more confidence is the renewal of U. S. aid, \$27 million of non-military assistance, which administration officials say will begin to reach the contras in six to eight weeks.

Still, some military analysts are skeptical that the contras can hold out against the Soviet-equipped Nicaraguan army.

Retired Lt. Colonel John Buchanan.

COLONEL JOHN BUCHANAN: It may not be that we like the fact that they're well trained. But by comparison with the contras, the Sandinista army, by and large, is well trained.

LLOYD: U. S. officials estimate that there are some 3,000 Cuban military advisers now in Nicaragua. Up until recently, their role in the fighting had been relatively limited. But some administration officials believe that may now change if the contras continue their military offensive.

Robin Lloyd, NBC News, the State Department.

CBS SATURDAY EVENING NEWS
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Peace Activists Released

BOB SCHIEFFER: A group of self-described peace activists is winding up a tour of southern Nicaragua today, a day after group members were released by anti-Sandinista rebels who'd held them briefly.

Michael Connor has more on this controversial group and what it hopes to achieve.

MICHAEL CONNOR: They made their final land call late yesterday, young people, old people, from many professions, from an organization with members from all over the United States which calls itself Witness for Peace, back from 29 hours of captivity in the jungle.

SHARON HOSTELER: Middle America. That's who we are. Christian people and people of